

The Power of Words

Communicating concepts
and ideas through writing



Riding the Rhythm

Have you ever wondered why the most effective writing flows from phrase to phrase, sentence to sentence, page after page? That subtle but all-important quality emerges from the writer's mastery of rhythm, the art to stitch together words in a skillful, natural way.

Yes, just as in music, rhythm is an important factor in effective writing. Perhaps they owe this similarity to the time before humans learned to write. We've learned that bards spread knowledge by telling stories. They may have been known as poets, minstrels, or even teachers.

Such a man was Homer, author of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, heroic poems that have influenced three millennia of western thought. We do not know how Homer told his epic tales. I picture him as an honored guest, sitting by the fire with a lyre in his hands, strumming notes or crashing chords while singing poems of heroic deeds long past. I imagine that music and words combined to create a gripping drama, a kind of prehistoric sound-and-light show in flickering firelight.

In those pre-literate days poetry was used as a memory aid, and rhythm was at its heart. The tales of Homer and his fellow bards were told in two-line rhyming couplets, each line containing five parts, the form we know as iambic pentameter. The rhythm and the rhyming words at the end of each pair of lines helped the poet remember correctly. They also made the stories flow smoothly to the ear.

We all learned about this in High School English, but many of us may have forgotten, or never realized, that rhythm is important in all writing. It is the lubricant that makes good writing flow. Without it, sentences might wander, stutter and struggle along the way.

Now perhaps you didn't notice but those two last sentences illustrate my point. The first has rhythm, and it flows, as you can see by adding emphasis:

"It IS the LUBRICANT that MAKES good WRITing FLOW."

See the rhythm? It flows like a line of poetry, in six part iambic form.

Now let's add emphasis in the second example:

"WITHOUT it, sentences might WANDer, STUTter and STRUGgle...", well, you get the idea. The message is in the words themselves.

While certainly acceptable, that sentence does not flow. It lacks rhythm. Yes, you can make sense of it, but it is just not elegant, not pleasing to the eye or ear.

How can you learn to write with rhythm? One simple idea is to do what Homer did: Speak your words aloud. They should flow across the tongue. If they do not, neither will they please the eye of any reader.

He Said, She Said

Perhaps the most over-used word in English is the verb "to say," most often seen in the form "said." That's a pity, because our language has many alternatives that can add nuance, context and meaning to any quoted statement.

For years I have kept a list of synonyms for "said," adding new ones as I encounter them. Such is the richness of the English language that there are now about 200 words on my list.

Let's examine some of the opportunities missed when lazy writers follow the path of least resistance. Let's start with this example: "What," he said.

Well, how can we interpret this? The bland, dead, neutral word "said" just lies there, leaving no identifying clues. The quoted word stands helpless and alone.

Here's another example: "What?" he

said. Now that one's a dead giveaway that something is wrong. That is not a statement, it is a question—and one should not "say" a question (although many writers do). Some appropriate forms are: "What?" she asked. "What?" he sputtered. "What?" she snapped. "What?" he demanded.

Each of these examples adds meaning, richness that is completely lost when the neutral "said" is used.

Here's an example using an exclamation mark, but following "What!" with "said" falls on the floor like a piece of toast, butter side down. Try these alternatives: "What!" she exclaimed. "What!" he protested. "What!" she cried. "What!" he snarled.

See how much we can add to meaning and context simply by using appropriate alternatives to "said"?

Playing It Safe with Apostrophes

How often in a day do you see an example of the inappropriate use of apostrophes? If you're paying attention its pretty frequently. Its like the apostrophe doesn't know it's place.

Well, did you catch me? I snuck three examples of that common error in the last two sentences. Probably the most common mistake with apostrophes is the confusion between "its," the possessive form of "it," and "it's," the contraction of "it is."

But it can be worse. How about the grocery store clerk who, upon seeing a word ending in "s" automatically reaches for an apostrophe? From this we are able to enjoy such visual jokes as "carrot's, two pound's for a dollar," "Special Sale's item's," or "Six pack's of Coke's"?

Apostrophes are slippery little devils because they serve two quite different purposes, and sometimes the rules are different for different words.

The first use of the apostrophe is to indicate that letters have been left out, as in "it's," "don't," and "can't." These are, of course, contractions of "it is," "do not," and "cannot."

The other use, and here is where the confusion comes in, is to indicate the possessive form of a noun. This yields such possessives as "king's," "cat's," and "nation's."

Add the fact that the letter "s" is often used to indicate a plural, as in "carrots," "pounds" or "packs" and you can see the opportunity for mischief.

And yet when it comes to "its-it's," the rules don't hold and it can confuse the best of us. When your brain stumbles, as mine sometimes does, and you start to write "it's" when you mean plain old "its," think of the order of personal pronouns—"he, she and it"—and remind yourself that the possessive form of "he" is not "hi's," nor is the possessive of "she" "her's." It follows that the possessive of "it" is not "it's."

All that in the face of the glaring fact that for kings, cats and nations we follow a different rule altogether. Indeed, it pays to keep a careful eye on those sneaky apostrophes.

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is an on-line newsletter produced by David L. Brown, APR, a freelance marketing communications writer. It is published quarterly. To receive future copies electronically, please e-mail david@dlbrown-inc.com, or visit my website at www.the-power-of-words.com.

Vol. 1 No. 1 - June, 2009